

Governor's Interagency Coordinating Council on Infants and Toddlers
Position on Natural Environments in Indiana:
Early Intervention in the Family's Everyday Activities

Introduction

Indiana's First Steps is a system of services and supports for families and their infants and toddlers with disabilities or developmental delays. Its mission is to ensure that all eligible families have easy access to comprehensive, coordinated services that address their individual needs. Administered by the Bureau of Child Development within the Division of Family and Children of Indiana's Family and Social Services Administration, the goals of First Steps include:

- enhancing the capacity of families to support their children's well-being, development, learning, and full participation in their communities;
- enhancing the willingness and capacity of communities to welcome, fully include, and support children with disabilities and their families; and
- insuring that children with disabilities grow up with opportunities to experience the same long term outcomes as everyone else-- health and wellness, choice and autonomy, membership within their families and communities, and a strong sense of personal respect, value and satisfaction.

Currently, First Steps is working to advance the provision of early intervention services in *natural environments*. Currently, there are family members and providers who are confused about this term and are unsure of where and how services should be provided; or are uncertain that services in the natural environment are appropriate for some children and families. Discussions concerning natural environments have typically focused on *where* services are to be provided, or have simply defined the natural environment as the *home*. In response, the Governor's Interagency Coordinating Council on Infants and Toddlers has put together this brief document to articulate its beliefs and recommendations concerning the provision of early intervention services in natural environments.

It is the belief and recommendation of the Governor's Interagency Coordinating Council on Infants and Toddlers that:

Services and supports are most effective when they are provided within the context of families' everyday routines, activities, and places. While where and when services are provided are essential elements in providing quality services in natural environments, equally important are the elements of what and how services are delivered. Therefore, services provided in these everyday routines, activities, and places, must also be developmentally appropriate and relevant to families' lives.

This position is derived from many sources, including what families tell us about their experiences, research findings, advances in practice, and legislative policy. Together, these sources provide the following *guiding principles* that help direct our efforts in providing early intervention services and supports in everyday routines, activities, and places:

1. All children are unique, with individual strengths and talents. The presence of a disability or special need is not the defining characteristic of any child.
2. Everyday routines, activities, and places offer countless opportunities for children to learn and develop.
3. Children grow and develop in the context of relationships with their families and other caregivers.
4. All children have the right to belong, to be welcomed, and to participate fully in the typical places and activities of their communities.
5. Children with and without special needs learn important things from one another.
6. The lives of families are enhanced when they are successful in maintaining their everyday lives and relationships.
7. Services and supports are most effective when they lead to outcomes that benefit children and families over their life span, and reflect how we want people with disabilities to be treated.

We hope you find this information helpful in understanding and designing early intervention services that are developmentally appropriate, relevant to families, and take place in everyday routines, activities, and places.

Key Concepts

Quality early intervention supports and services require the establishment of several key concepts. Services must be provided in everyday routines, activities, and places. They must also be developmentally appropriate and relevant to families' lives.

Early Intervention Supports and Services Can Be Successful in Everyday Routines, Activities, and Places

Early intervention supports and services should be delivered in settings and during activities which are determined by the child's needs, the desired functional outcomes, and the family's life-style and routines.

Family routines are the usual events that are customarily a part of families' schedules. These routines might include meal time, bath time, play time, car rides, and naptime. Everyday activities that a family does with their infant or toddler might include such things as having fun at the playground, going for a walk, spending time with friends at a playgroup, shopping, and going to the library. Everyday places are those that families and typically developing children frequent, day-in and day-out, including the home, the neighborhood, and community programs such as a recreation center, library, park, or store.

Supports and services should:

- Occur in the child's regular environments;
- Include the child's siblings, care providers, other family members, and friends;
- Discover the child's talents and gifts and support them in the context of typical play and relationships;
- Apply specialized expertise to adapt and accommodate routines, activities, and places to support the child's full participation and learning.

Early Intervention Supports and Services Must Be Developmentally Appropriate

It is well founded in both research and practice that developmentally appropriate practices enhance learning and development for all children. Developmentally appropriate practices are responsive to, and respectful of, individual children. Developmentally appropriate practice is the process of families and professionals planning and providing supports and services based on:

1. knowledge of child development and learning;
2. the strengths, interests, and needs of each individual child; and
3. an understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which each individual child lives to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for that child and his or her family.
(Bredekamp & Copple, 1997)

It is through the integration of these three aspects that decisions are made regarding the best ways to meet a child's needs and support their participation in everyday life.

Early Intervention Supports and Services Must Be Relevant to Families' Lives

A primary purpose of early intervention is to enhance the capacity of families to support their children's development and learning. In order to achieve this, supports and services need to be relevant to families' lives. Early intervention services need to address families' concerns, priorities, and resources as well as "fitting" the context of their culture, life-style, and schedules.

Providers need to focus on this relevancy from the very beginning of their relationship with a family, from the initial stages of identification through the development of an Individual Family Services Plan (IFSP). Service providers can keep their supports and services relevant by listening to, and planning with, families. Through conversations focused on the perspectives of the entire family, practitioners can learn what family members currently do and want to do in the future, key individuals in their lives, and how best to blend early intervention services and supports so that children participate fully and families can maintain ordinary lives and relationships.

Challenges to Natural Environments in Indiana – The ICC has identified several challenges that impact full compliance with natural environments in Indiana. The potential barriers are outlined here with the following section describing solutions and/or concepts that demonstrate successful implementation.

- A. Conflicting philosophical perspectives – Families and providers have been used to receiving early intervention services in a medical model which traditionally features services being delivered in a hospital or other clinical setting. Services under this model have tended to be more clinician-directed and less family-directed. In order to make the transition from providing services under the medical model to integrating services into the child’s everyday routines, both families and providers must alter the way they view service delivery in early intervention. *(See 1,2,3,5,8 below)*
- B. Family Expectations – Families rely on their early intervention providers to help them transition into the system. The way in which natural environments are introduced will have an impact on how families respond to the way services are delivered. For those families already in the system, they may feel apprehensive about the perceived change in the way their services are delivered. They may feel a loss of comfort in the initial stages of the transition to routine-based intervention. *(See 2,6,7,10 below)*
- C. Dealing with misperceptions – Everyone involved in the First Steps system has their own interpretation of what it means to provide service in a natural environment. This has created many misperceptions, confusion, and apprehension around the implementation of providing services within a child’s everyday routines. *(See 1,2,3,7,8,10 below)*
- D. Logistical issues – Because providing routine-based intervention takes place in the child’s everyday activities and routines, there are some logistical problems that are unique to this type of therapy. These include expenses incurred from no show appointments and mileage accumulated driving to and from therapy sessions (especially in rural areas). *(See 9,12,13 below)*
- E. Finding socialization opportunities (family and child) – During the first three years of a child’s life, socialization with others is very important to that child’s development. In some rural areas in particular, the ability to find appropriate social interaction activities for children in this age range and their families is a concern. *(See 2,4 below)*
- F. Families with special/multiple challenges – Some families enter the early intervention system with special challenges to providing routine-based services. These may include situations such as families and childcare providers who do not want strangers in their home, to families who are experiencing a very chaotic or even unsafe home environment. *(See 6,8,11,14 below)*

Principles characterizing successful implementation of natural environments

- 1. The concept of natural environments should be embedded in all materials and in every discussion with families. The service coordinator should address how early intervention can best support them in their ability to meet their child’s needs. These discussions begin at intake and continue through evaluations and IFSP development. Reviews and revisions of the IFSP should talk about and focus on concerns within the context of functional daily routines. *(See A,C above)*
- 2. A child’s home is one example of a “natural environment”, but children and families participate in a variety of community activities in other locations that are natural for them as well. If the family does not want services in their home, another location that is also a natural environment for the child can be sought where the identified needs can be addressed. *(See A,B,C,E above)*
- 3. The location of services cannot be determined based on category of disability, configuration of the service delivery system, availability of services, availability of space, payer, or administrative or service provider convenience. *(See A,C above)*
- 4. Natural groups are groups of typically developing children, which would continue to exist if the children with disabilities were removed. *(See E above)*
- 5. Service providers should value preserving the families typical routines so that they make their supports and services “fit” the family instead of making the family “fit” the services. *(See A above)*

- 6. If parents and other caregivers have been involved in planning and have learned to incorporate the suggested activities into daily routines using available materials in the natural environment, each child will get more opportunities to experience and practice the new skill. *(See B,F above)*
- 7. Outcomes should be identified first. The steps and strategies to achieve an outcome are explored by identifying (1) what will happen in the families daily routines to support the outcome; and (2) by whom and where in the various settings that the child and family frequent can these steps be practiced. *(See B,C above)*
- 8. Service providers should serve as consultants and use their knowledge and expertise to help others who are part of the child's daily environments learn to facilitate learning opportunities to assist the child in achieving outcomes. Family members and other key individuals involved in the child's daily routines have strengths and expertise that can assist the child in achieving the IFSP outcomes. *(See A,C above)*
- 9. The decision about location is made by the IFSP team to meet the child's individual needs. No individual member of the team can unilaterally determine the environment for service delivery and the "preferences" of one team member cannot be considered acceptable "justification" for not providing services in the natural environment. Every effort should be made to elect an environment that the entire IFSP team, including the parent, supports. *(See D above)*
- 10. There is nothing inherently medical about early intervention services. When families are presented with a developmental and natural environment model, they will likely become involved and invested in that process. The current barrier of families perceiving a loss of the medical model will be eliminated through the conversion process. *(See B,C above)*
- 11. The choice of service delivery setting must not be influenced by providers' personal values regarding lifestyle, cleanliness or parenting practices. The setting for service delivery must always be based on the best interests of the child and the outcomes to be met. *(See F above)*
- 12. In response to the challenge of whether or not the no-show rate increases or decreases in natural settings, data analyzed for 1997 and 1998 shows services conducted in natural environments are utilized at a 5% higher rate than services provided in center-based settings. *(See D above)*
- 13. The issue of economics has been raised as more providers conduct services outside of clinical facilities. Indiana has always offered an incentive to providers who go "off-site" to deliver early intervention services. Those providers are compensated at a higher rate than providers who remain "on-site." All early intervention provider payment rates are reviewed periodically to determine cost effectiveness and system solvency. First Steps will continue to monitor provider rates and make revisions as appropriate. *(See D above)*
- 14. Early intervention supports and services must be relevant to families' lives, while taking into account a family's concerns and priorities. Providers need to focus on this relevancy within the context of that individual family's culture and lifestyle. However, when environments are less than ideal, it is the role of the provider to develop a trusting relationship with the family so they see the value of change in order to maximize the development and learning capability of their child. *(See F above)*

ICC Vision for the First Steps Early Intervention System

Our goal is to provide a family-centered, comprehensive, coordinated, neighborhood-based system of services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families. To this end we:

- Involve families in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the service system;
- Make services easily accessible and widely dispersed throughout the community;
- Offer choices to families that are typical of the choices available to all families of young children;
- Offer services that are culturally sensitive and tailored to individual family priorities;
- Offer services that exemplify best practices in early intervention and remain accountable for the quality of these services by evaluating them in terms of process and outcome;
- Respect families by acknowledging that they are the primary constant in the child's life and by helping them to make choices, as well as supporting them as they implement those choices, even when we disagree with them;
- Focus on prevention of, as well as intervention for, disabilities among infants and toddlers, keeping in mind that the ultimate goal is to maximize the potential of children so that they can function as contributing members of society as adults;
- Creatively use existing resources and seek additional resources to maximize service options for families and to fairly compensate staff for providing services.

Defining Natural Environments

This position paper was developed in accordance with the federal definition of natural environments as seen in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part C, 34CFR, 303.12 Early Intervention Services:

(b) Natural Environments: To the maximum extent appropriate to the need of the child, early intervention services must be provided in natural environments, including the home and community settings in which children without disabilities participate.

(Authority 20 USC 1401(1) and (2); 1432 (4); As amended 63 FR 18294, April 14, 1998)

References

The key concepts section (page 2) is being used with permission from: Edelman, L. (Ed.) (1999). A Guidebook: Early Intervention Supports and Services in Everyday Routines, Activities, and Places in Colorado. Denver: Colorado Department of Education.

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